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**ELMO ZUMWALT AND WORTH BAGLEY**

# Democracy against terrorism

**T**he Reagan administration is relearning the lessons of what is involved in making timely responses to uncertain warning signals that some group or state plans to do harm to American interests.

A recent example of instructive and painful experience is the series of successful terrorist attacks in Beirut. But the reasons that cause us to be surprised stretch beyond incidences of terrorism to include Soviet efforts in unstable regions to gain influence and create internal disturbances.

President Nixon did not expect the Arab-Israeli war in 1973, nor President Carter the Afghanistan invasion of 1979, nor Prime Minister Thatcher the attack on the Falkland Islands in 1982. The hostility, subversion, and maneuvering normal now in world affairs can easily mask the deliberate decision to undertake an act of aggression.

As a result, our intelligence and warning system is put at a great disadvantage. Therefore, a heavy responsibility falls on our decision-makers to weigh obscure or equivocal evidence if we are to act promptly in response to a potential threat.

Failure to take precautionary measures will preclude the possibility of averting such aggression. Any hesitation by the United States to respond effectively — either in a pre-emptive or retaliatory manner — enables the committed aggressor to achieve his objectives and makes the reassertion of U.S. interests infeasible or extremely costly.

To his credit, President Reagan has understood the problems of making responses to ambiguous warning of terrorism or regional hostilities. With mixed success, he seeks to reduce the odds that the U.S. will be surprised.

The buildup of American armed forces and the defense strategy for deploying forces in unstable regions where U.S. interests are at stake is designed to raise the risks for aggressors by narrowing the possibility that surprise can be achieved. Strengthening rapid-deployment ground and air forces speeds the means to bring arms to bear at threatened points. Enlarging our Navy adds to regional deterrence forces whose employment is independent of the hesitation of friends or allies to grant access to bases in times of crisis.

At least in theory, U.S. forces so configured and strategically situated to deter aggression should also be able to prepare for and respond to a terrorist threat abroad. That readiness will cause a potential attacker to think twice before acting — for the fanatical terrorist will never be dissuaded completely.

A related and important readying precaution against terrorism is the building-up of local defenses around American facilities overseas. For some reason, the White House has had difficulty in getting that particular job done.

A factor contributing to uneven progress in adapting to uncertain warning is an irresolute Congress. The political opposition continues to chop away at the president's defense requests while maligning him for what they perceive as the administration's slowness in completing isolated local protection programs. The congressional ambivalence over the declaration by Secretary of State Shultz that the United States would retaliate with force to terrorist acts sustains the image of an irresolute America.

U.S. ability to respond effectively to terrorism and regional hostilities is best examined, however, against the background of limitations placed on our intelligence capabilities.

President Reagan has acted to improve the U.S. intelligence-gathering capabilities that would provide early warning of terrorism and regional aggression. The intellectual process of noting and judging indications of an emerging threat receives new emphasis. A distinction has been established between the higher continuing level of international agitation and commotion, on one hand, and the deliberate, perhaps ominous deviations from the norm.

But even these improved techniques are susceptible to manipulation by a skilled adversary.

He may repeatedly initiate false signals of impending terrorist acts or hostilities and yet not take action, only for the purpose of encouraging U.S. laxity, before striking the fatal blow. Deceptive, visible warning signs created at one point may be used to mask a planned aggression or terrorist attack elsewhere, one whose preparations are designed not to draw attention.

The complexities particularly involved in dealing with the terrorist problem become readily apparent. It requires, at the outset, identification of the terrorist threat before it transmutes itself into a terrorist act. This is a difficult process, for the ambiguous warning signals one receives will inevitably create uncertainties as to another's true intentions. It underscores, however, the importance of an improved intelligence-gathering capability by an agency permitted a little freer rein by congressional oversight.

It also involves, having accurately identified that threat, being able to respond to it with forces that have been configured in such a manner as to get to the right place at the right time.

Further, it involves a degree of international cooperation — not only in the form of the exchange of intelligence on terrorist groups but also in the form of demonstrating a united front in dealing with terrorists.

Finally, and perhaps most important, it involves the Congress and White House reaching a mutual understanding as to what is involved in minimizing the terrorist threat and what is at stake if we fail to do so.